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Book Review



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by Luke Rodewald



About the Author

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Book Review

Luke Rodewald

Song, Min Hyoung. 2022. *Climate Lyricism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Despite their escalating frequency and severity, the signs and effects of climate change's arrival remain largely obscured to the public eye. Although visible and felt, the phenomenon's consequential, interlinking environmental catastrophes—destructive tropical storms, relentless droughts, deadly heat waves, torrential flooding, uncontrollable wildfires—are routinely dismissed by rhetoric which declares their appearance unusual, unprecedented, or unthinkable. Such mislabels promote the socio-cultural “fairy tale,” to quote journalist David Wallace-Wells, that imagines climate change as a glacial threat, remote problem, or “natural” occurrence (2019, 3). As suggested by Min Hyoung Song in his provocative, illuminating, and compelling *Climate Lyricism*, climate change's persistent cultural invisibility—and, accordingly, the continual absence of meaningful, systemic attempts to engage or combat its accelerants—is cemented and made possible by repetitive, purposeful denial. While routinely engaging with climate change on a personal level may seem daunting, futile, or emotionally overwhelming, as Sarah Jaquette Ray has shown, such mindfulness also holds the potential to promote greater personal agency and embolden collective action (2020, 6). The crisis, Song argues, requires “a slower burn of attentiveness, a willingness to sit with discomfort...a returning again and again to contemplation. These are the demands of an everyday attention that is continually locked in a wrestling match with everyday denial” (2022, 67). While contemporary fiction and other literary devices struggle to adequately engage with the complexities of climate change, the lyric—in particular, what Song terms the *revived lyric*—orients readers' attention to the everyday manifestations of calamity that, otherwise, lie largely unacknowledged.

For Song, the revived lyric—with its striking emphasis on the nuances of the present moment, its exploration on the vocalized exchanges between two individuals, and, in turn, its understating of character, action, and plot—redirects attention to the here and now: “It speaks to the place of the human and makes a claim on behalf of the human to understand and act as part of the numinous world” (41). *Climate Lyricism* not only traces the emergence of this technique and phenomenon in recent literary works, but also articulates an encouragement for the reader to embrace the revived lyric’s philosophical underpinnings on a daily basis. Trekking across a range of genres, modes, and perspectives, Song closely examines an assemblage of texts which accentuate the revived lyric and, thereby, complicate existing understandings of its characteristics. In doing so, Song demonstrates how individual, sustained attention to the climate crisis initiates a collaborative exercise, fostering a shared sense of agency that enables collective efforts to make “more livable worlds” (15). As such, *Climate Lyricism* indirectly offers an answer to Timothy Clark’s provocative musing about the disillusionment of ecocriticism and environmental literary studies in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*: “How far does a change in knowledge and imagination entail a change in environmentally destructive modes of life” (2015, 18)? *Climate Lyricism* avers that such self-conscious thinking about climate change is, indeed, a genuine “action” step that contributes toward more holistic efforts to combat the “shared struggle” of the crisis (2022, 15). As Song contends, “paying attention and sharing what has been observed *are* actions, just as much as scientific research, activism, and the Hydra-like task of reorganizing how human societies operate” (3, emphasis mine). Sustaining one’s focus and routinely reflecting on climate change through mindful reading and viewing instills a habit of mind that makes it impossible to look away or remain indifferent toward its pressing threats.

Such critical interventions are necessary, as Song illustrates in his opening chapter, because contemporary efforts to contest climate change are thwarted by, largely, an active state of denial. A close reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* reveals how distinct forms of denial—literal, interpretive, and implicatory, as articulated by the late sociologist Stanley Cohen—can mutually operate through a socio-cultural attention deficit disorder in which collective individuals recognize a significant truth or piece of information and then, purposefully, do not engage with its consequences (2001, 22). Song pairs Cohen’s configurations with the equally explanatory work of sociologist Kari Norgaard to demonstrate how “everyday denial” of the climate crisis infects interpersonal discussion of the issue, rendering it exponentially more difficult to engage (Song 25; Cohen 2001, 24). For Song, such denial is—like climate lyricism—the end result of sustained, purposeful actions: “The turning away from the implications of a disturbing fact is *as active as* the turning toward this fact” (28, emphasis original). Like

the characters in Ishiguro's novel and those of Teju Cole's *Open City*, who are all born into and then largely maintain a general state of willful ignorance toward crucial aspects of their reality, the public's everyday denial of climate change is also fueled by a "refusal to admit...facts candidly and to think through their implications as far as they will go" (36).

Enter the revived lyric, which trains the reader's attention toward keeping everyday, seemingly mundane phenomena in the foreground. Like poet-scholar Margaret Ronda and others who recognize its subversive properties, Song views the revived lyric as "intimately connected to a reimagining of the everyday as a refined attention to experiences" (41). Song's second chapter establishes the device's qualities in this regard, performing a close, textual analysis of poems by Claudia Rankine and Craig Santos Perez, whose works deploy the lyric to shape their reader's attention toward subliminal occurrences of racial microaggressions and climate change that are frequently overlooked or dismissed in daily life. By calling attention to the seeming "smallness" of everyday racism or the increasing effects of the climate crisis, the authors' revivals of the lyric exemplify "being aware of how the everyday offers opportunities for such witnessing that is active and purposeful" (64). Song's analysis here displays how engagement with the textual lyric leads its reader toward an embodied lyricism wherein an attunement to everyday phenomenon is sharpened. Throughout *Climate Lyricism*, Song expands on this initial articulation, soliciting examples from a wide range of poetic and fictional texts that, likewise, embrace a lyrical approach to climate change and, thereby, angle their reader's interests and attention to what is often hiding in plain sight. Song's examination is comprehensive, soliciting an array of global perspectives—Tommy Pico, Ada Limón, Han Kang, to name just three—that viscerally demonstrate not only climate change's ubiquity, but also its intersectional tendrils rooted in racism, extractive capitalism, as well as the overarching, engulfing "coloniality" of climate change, which "rests on racial logic" and unequally distributes its "continual impacts" throughout the Global North and South (Sultana 2022, 2).

Song's book is both situated in and complicates existing theories within the ecocritical subfield of new materialism. Citing the influential works of scholars such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, the configuration of climate lyricism likewise challenges the primacy of human agency by highlighting those of nonhuman beings and objects, along with their independent existence. The lyric "can speak from an inhuman or nonhuman position that asks its readers to experience a very different world in the here and now than the ones they me accustomed to inhabiting" (2022, 58). For example, reading Perez's "The Age of Plastic," Song concentrates on the poet's use of bold typeface to draw the reader's attention to the recurring "plastic" mentions as well as the accompanying verbiage of impact the objects carry out. Combined, these textual details

unveil the agency of plastic: “it might not be as deliberate as the kind humans practice, but it nevertheless has effects on the world that need to be attended to” (62). While Song ultimately positions climate lyricism as a human action—intended to generate shared human agency toward meaningful responses to the climate crisis—this critical attention to new materialism grounds such anthropocentric objectives with the acknowledgement that, as material ecocritics Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have elucidated, humans and objects are bound together as “storied” matter: “a material mesh of meanings, properties, and processes that produce undeniable signifying forces” (2014, 2).

The stories we tell about climate change, likewise, matter. For Song, the burgeoning genre of climate fiction holds both potential and, currently, limitations—particularly in regard to the novel’s struggles with its organizational, schematic plots. Song’s critique here extends those voiced by Rob Nixon, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, and Amitav Ghosh, the latter famously documenting the “peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents” to contemporary fiction (Ghosh 2016, 9). Song, likewise, perceives genre-specific aesthetic challenges within climate change novels which require “experiments in form” to move away from tidy, linear plots and pursue a more holistic, nuanced method of environmental storytelling. Using Richard Power’s 2018 Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Overstory* as an example of an ambitious, yet ultimately flawed attempt to depict the climate crisis within the novel’s parameters, Song outlines five overarching concerns for climate fiction: “a sensitivity to precarity, wariness of progress, a rejection of mastery, an awareness of the slowness of different kinds of phenomenon, and an acknowledgement of the impurity” (2022, 108). Such characteristics, Song suggests, would thereby encourage readers to not seek some sort of moral absolutism or plot-driven closure, but rather steer them toward more profound, mindful encounters with the story’s ideas outside the text on a daily basis. Such work, while challenging, is an exercise in thought from which can spring “alternative pathways” to traditional modes of thinking and living (119).

Where fiction falters, poetry and other lyrical forms emerge as resources wherein, through the lyric, readers are trained to encounter the “mundane” of everyday experiences altered by climate change. In doing so, Song argues, “the mundane can give way to something else, the exceptional and the extraordinary that is buried there” (122). Unlike the rigid cultural expectations of the novel, poetry’s experimentation with forms and devices allows for more complex depictions of what Morton would call the “hyperobject” qualities of climate change’s scale and temporality (2013). Over three consecutive chapters, Song considers an array of texts, songs, and other media forms that use the lyric to “attain a vantage point where they can rise above their lowliest analogies to look down at what otherwise wouldn’t be visible” (125). Li-Young Lee’s poem “The

Cleaving,” for example, zooms in on the significance of a single moment and deploys the revived lyric to “turn what would otherwise be a brief and easily forgotten encounter into an event worthy of sustained attention” (131). Likewise, Song posits the visual chronicling of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels within the Keeling Curve—a visual record tracking daily measurements of global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration levels—as a resource that simultaneously enables viewers to consider both the everyday, short-term facets of the climate crisis and the systemic, global mechanisms that fuel it (142). Poetry, too, illuminates the interconnected, multi-scale, multi-temporal aspects of climate change that bond individual actions to global events. Song spotlights Bernadette Mayer’s epic poem *Midwinter Day* as a work that requires a reader’s close-minded attentiveness to, inevitably, reveal how domestic life and local activities are “connected to events happening in far-flung places” (157). Recalling Ursula Heise’s elucidatory analysis of globally-minded novels in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008), Song demonstrates how such cultural works foster an “ecocosmopolitan” understanding of the climate crisis for readers, enabling them to think “planetarily” and better see the ties between the small, individual, and local and the global “working of the whole” (Heise 10; Song 158).

The challenge *Climate Lyricism* extends for its readers to pursue is ambitious: keep the climate crisis at the forefront of your attention, despite all the forces and inclinations suggesting you do otherwise. While such a claim might easily be interpreted as an abstraction or general gesture, Song’s book avoids being lost in the hypothetical through its most dazzling, absorbing, and pragmatic chapter, “How Should I Live? Inattention and Everyday Life Projects.” Situated squarely in the middle of the book, Song presses pause on his close readings and theoretical constructions to candidly address the practical considerations that follow an embodied attempt at climate lyricism. Through its own deployment of lyrical prose—an engaging, direct dialogue between Song’s own authorial “I” and his reader’s “you”—Song incorporates the philosophical notion of Andrew Epstein’s “everyday life projects” to articulate what tangible actions might be taken for a reader to better keep climate change and the everyday in mind (Epstein 2016, 155). Such actions, Song notes, can be transformative; they are “informal experiments in living and . . . building material for imagining in as concrete a way as possible how to live differently” (82). While recognizing that individual actions to engage climate change—forgoing fossil fuel-based transportation, participating in local protests and activism campaigns, undertaking a plant-based diet, recycling and avoiding single-use plastic consumption—are linked to the myth of the *personal* “carbon footprint” and cannot, alone, meaningfully counter the larger crisis, Song argues that these efforts “keep the topic in mind, make new social collectivities possible, and act as the nucleus of whatever

might emerge as vibrant public discourses that center on this topic” (92). Song’s explanatory writing—in this chapter, particularly, but throughout *Climate Lyricism*—is extraordinarily lucid and profound, orchestrating an intricate back-and-forth between the author’s personal reflection on living with climate change and a grounding of these experiences with philosophical and theoretical configurations. Song ends this absorbing chapter by noting that even the presumably small act of reading literature about climate change can be a significant step in fostering and maintaining awareness and spurring collective expressions of shared human agency (97). With its insightful, profound interrogation of global texts and an overarching argument that transcends the typical esoteric confinements of academic writing, *Climate Lyricism*, likewise, stands a significant endeavor in this regard.

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